

Counting The Dead

This past week, I have, along with thousands of others around American, been engaged in a curiously ghoulish phenomenon: we have all been waiting for the 2000th American soldier to die in Iraq. We were planning vigils, wakes, memorials, and various other such events to commemorate this eventuality. While in the midst of this, I received a copy of a feature written by my journalist brother in Sri Lanka, of a boy named Abhilash, an infant born to Jenita and Murugupillai Jeyarajah, whom the world will remember only as Baby No. 9 for the 9 sets of mothers and fathers who claimed him in the wake of the tsunami. The article spoke of the importance of recognizing individual human beings, of resisting the attempts that are and will always be made, to assign numbers – and therefore anonymity – to our histories.

Staff Sgt. George T. Alexander Jr., according to one report, was a father who could not keep the promise he made to his children – an 8 year old son and a 6 year old daughter – that he would be home in Killeen, TX, soon after Christmas. He could not because he succumbed to the injuries he suffered when his Bradley exploded in Samara. On October 25th, Alexander became the 2000th soldier whose death set the stage for the protests and memorials that will happen throughout the country this week.

The Senate held a moment of silence, and the names of the 2000 soldiers who have died were read in the capitol that day. On Sunday, there will be white flags erected to remember each one of them in downtown Waterville. On Monday, students from Colby plan their own memorial, which will also list the names of those soldiers.

I support and will participate in all of these activities. But I cannot shake off the fact that while we made our preparations on every side of the political aisle, we were all waiting for “someone” to die. A 2000th soldier – whoever he or she was going to be – had to die. John Cory once said that “Politics is the luxury of the safe-at-home. War is a lottery of survival.” Alexander lost that lottery, but perhaps we can help him and his family win it back. We can stop counting the dead and begin remembering them. We can stop waiting for them to die and begin helping them to live.

At 34 years of age, Alexander's platoon called him ‘Grandpa’ because he was their oldest member. His sister Sasha Spence says that “he was a wonderful brother and I would give anything to have him back.” There are others who feel that way.

For those to whom numbers matter, here are some from CNN. There have been, as of today, 2,201 coalition troop deaths, 2,004 Americans, 98 Britons, 13 Bulgarians, two Danes, two Dutch, two Estonians, one Hungarian, 26 Italians, one Kazakh, one Latvian, 17 Poles, one Salvadoran, three Slovaks, 11 Spaniards, two Thai and 18 Ukrainians in the war in Iraq. From ABC News I found out that in March, 2003, in the days after the start of the bombing of Iraq, 59 American soldiers died in Iraq. So far, in the most recent month, October, 2005, 60 soldiers have died.

For those who want to remember that these were human beings, here are a few, very few, details. Sgt. Sean C. Reynolds, 25 years old of East Lansing, Michigan was killed on May 3rd, in Iraq. Uday Singh was 21 years old and not yet become an American citizen when he died in an ambush near Habbaniyah Air Force base on December 1, 2004. I don't know what number either of them were.

In Brook Park, Ohio, a town that lost 14 marines in a single car bombing this past summer, there's a man named Ronald Griffin. He lost his son two and a half years ago. This is what he said on the occasion of the announcement from the Pentagon: "I only look at the individuals. I don't think it's a significant number at all unless you think about the individuals who make it up. Who was 98? Who was 99? Who is going to be 2,001?"

This morning I woke up, as usual, to National Public Radio. It was a story from Iraq. The story of a man named Manadel al-Jamadi who died in Abu Ghraib, hours after his capture by the Navy SEALs and the CIA. His bruised, bloodied corpse was seen around the world, stuffed in a box of ice and Sgt. Charles Graner giving a thumbs up sign and grinning over it. I went on line to see what else I could find out about this story. There I found a picture of Manadel al-Jamadi's widow and his son who looks about 8 years old. They have no names. Nor do the children of George T. Alexander Jr.

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